

## **Forward Theatre: An Introduction**

### Author

Head, Sabina

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# Forward Theatre: An Introduction

Sabina Head  
Griffith University  
Australia

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## Abstract

*Futurists build scenarios for clients and are concerned with effectively communicating them. Stories provide frameworks and aim to engage audiences with entertainment techniques that include more than rational thinking and analysis, by exploring alternative futures involving characters and events as individuals deal with issues brought about by a new situation. Stories work at multiple levels including the most profound, offering new insights and patterns of thinking. Theatre can present characters in relationships, who 'show the story', reacting to events in the 'here and now', for audiences who remain semiobjective observers while developing empathy with the characters in their concrete, if temporary future. In the process, audiences are exposed to futures thinking, extending possibilities for change. Forward Theatre is a discovered genre for exploring futures issues that has potential uses for futurists.*

**Keywords:** forward theatre, futures studies drama, futures communication genre

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## Forward Theatre as a Futures Informed Genre

Theatre is a holistic performance art; it includes visual elements, sound elements, language, body language and movement through time and space; and it is designed for communication to audiences, with or without media assistance or enhancement. Drama is an aesthetic way of knowing that includes theatre. During a theatrical performance, the elements, or ingredients of drama are continually manipulated by a production team in combination with each other to create a rich, complex, concrete event with layers of meaning constructed and discovered by participants during the show and on later reflection.

Theatre is also a medium for shared communication as participants – observers, performers, and behind-the-scene contributors and writers – create, experience, interpret, discuss and reflect on stories and their meanings. These shared stories can be based on futures scenarios and enact them, bringing them to life for a little while.

The stories themselves may not be new (except insofar as characters deal with a new situation), but the situations will be. The novelty lies in the characters' dealings with the new future situation;

one born from exploration and creation of an alternative future – different from today.

Forward Theatre is useful as a genre for exploring futures issues. A Forward Theatre play can demonstrate a concrete, if temporary, hypothetical live future scenario. Skilfully crafted performances in the genre can inform audiences about alternative futures and engender futures thinking; they can present different characters' viewpoints on the scenario and encourage debate on the practicality and desirability of the future presented.

Playwrights have been dealing with the future since plays have been written, and have not always had access to new futures tools and concepts. They have at times, however, explored the possible impact of social or technological changes. Futures tools are now available to be used by artists. Their value lies in sharpening the focus on the future and clarifying the processes by which future scenarios may be created and given a history, showing audiences what a particular future vision might look like in action and how it may play out if it occurs in practice.

Theatre has had less influence and smaller audiences as a mainstream art form since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the advent of film, television and new media, but it has advantages in that it can be relatively inexpensive, small in scale, and presented without technical media support (at least in daylight!). This allows for rewrites as the production team notes how live audiences react to live performers. The low-tech production possibilities and the small scale together with this instant response make theatre a flexible tool, a way for people to offer stories to others and interact in a live space. Broadway, the West End and other venues still offer live performances on a larger scale as well, demonstrating the endurance of theatre despite generally smaller audiences.

But why would futurists themselves be interested in theatrical representations of possible futures?

Jarratt (2009, p.7) provides a possible rationale: "In our work as futurists we find that although people are often fascinated by the idea of exploring the future, the concepts involved do not easily become part of their thinking". She sees the importance of studying and discussing the future as undeniable: "'The future' or even 'alternative futures' have broad implications for people and organisations in the present". She also sees the necessity of helping people 'fully understand and consider those implications and take them into account in their decisions'. According to Jarratt, one problem lies with "the study of the future [which] tends towards an abstract discussion that is less than compelling", in contrast with "entertainment [which] uses familiar stories to attract and gain our attention". Slaughter (1991, p.98) echoes this as he describes "one of the problems to be faced if we want to implement foresight at the social level. How can future possibilities be made *real* enough to stimulate present-day responses"? Inayatullah (2008, p.6) relates to this with his concept of alignment: "the vision must link to the day-to-day realities; our day-to-day measures must reflect the vision." He ranges further in discussing changes at deeper layers (ibid, p.12), noting the need for "seeking solutions from outside the [worldview] framework in which the solution has been defined". At the more profound levels of myth and identity, he advises that the "solutions require deepest interventions, as this requires telling a new story, rewiring the brain and building new memories and the personal and collective body." Such sto-

rytelling lies within the domain of the playwright, among others. Indeed, Inayatullah suggests (ibid, p.11) that "new futures are more often than not driven by a creative minority", possibly writers and other artists.

Altogether, the difficulty of dealing with futures concepts, the questioned reality of the possibilities, the necessary link with everyday life, the potential solutions outside the usual frameworks, the artistic drivers of new futures, and our familiarity with stories all relate to a potential development of the field in a communicative direction – that of helping to bring future scenarios to life for others.

As Jarratt says (2009, p.8), "Futurists must rethink scenarios as a process and a tool, and discover ways to use them much more effectively as powerful stories that can motivate reshaping the future. She suggests (ibid. p.9) reframing the presented futures using "effective, emotionally-based, stories and ideas that ... the public and our clients ... can use to internalize and exercise their thinking on." Jarratt sees the role of reframing in that it can use nonrational methods, changing dominant paradigms and ideas (including dystopia), and suggesting that change is actually possible. She sees it as helping to simplify for understanding, connecting ideas, exploring our roles, connecting with our subconscious, and exposing bias. In her view, futurists offer these gifts: new stories and new thinking, comparing frameworks, understanding the forces at play, validating new stories and frames, and supplying new stories to suit new frameworks. However she also refers to people's need to be emotionally engaged in order to better understand future changes and events, noting that (ibid. p.10) "We [futurists] accommodate the analytical in order to be taken seriously enough to be able to tell the human story", but adding that (ibid. p.11) "futurists will benefit from learning how to use stories and to frame and reframe experiences and ideas so that they can be heard, seen, and understood emotionally."

Slaughter (1991, p.69) suggests that stories are "powerful exploratory devices" that are "used to explore many aspects of human futures in ways not accessible to reason, analysis or the techniques of futures research", although they may of course be solidly based on research. Stories are able to use leaps of imagination in presenting alternative versions of the future, and using characters and situations that juxtapose contrasting discourses. They can be used in the current transition of cultures that is sweeping societies, as a way of participating in the "transformative process involving breakdowns and renewals of meaning" (ibid. p.81), as they are shared by audiences and story presenters. Slaughter (1999, p.ix) stresses that "to begin to grasp the futures dimension, in all its symbolic and practical richness, is to begin a process of discovery and recovery". This could be assisted by continuing to explore the "symbolic grounding of all futures work" (ibid. p.vii).

The need is echoed by Berry (2000, p.82): "in order to reconstruct our world, the responsibility is to reissue and rework our metaphors". And symbol is one of the basic ingredients of drama. At this point the usefulness of drama in providing a response to the above task can be outlined.

## A Working Definition of Theatre

Pickering and Woolgar (2009, p.46) offer this description of "what actually happens in the course of an event we call theatre. At its simplest yet most profound we relate and share stories" and these are demonstrated by the performer who creates a character "about whose destiny an audience may have a concern and it is the actor's primary task to tell that character's story" (ibid. p.47).

The stories are performed for humans, using humans as the artistic medium, and concern humans at some point. Brockett and Ball (2008, p.16) explain that theatre "remains the art (along with film and television) most capable of recreating everyday human experience", at the same time being "the most objective of the arts, because characteristically it presents both outer and inner experience through speech and action" (ibid.). Another aspect of this performer/audience relationship is that of aesthetic distance, a state, according to Brockett and Ball (ibid. p.14) "in which we are sufficiently detached to view an artistic event semiobjectively". It is partnered with the equally important "feeling of involvement" (ibid.), or empathy towards the characters performed by the actors.

These features of theatre are most valuable for working towards Brockett and Ball's (ibid. p.18) description of "one of the primary goals of both education and life" – that of experiencing "(emotionally, imaginatively, and intellectually) what it means to be human in the broadest sense" (ibid.). They (ibid. p.5) add that "in almost all periods at least some people have considered theatre not only an acceptable form of entertainment but also a truthful reflection of human behaviour". If, as Brockett and Ball state (ibid. p.14), art is "one way human beings seek to understand their world", by "stripping away irrelevant details and by organising and telescoping events so that they compose a connected pattern", then a play has the capacity to illuminate and comment "(although sometimes indirectly) on human experience even as it creates it".

In simple terms, Pickering and Woolgar (2009, p.3) describe an act of theatre as taking place "when a performer finds a space and an audience gathers to observe some form of action". An agreement and a relationship are formed between the two. The audience agrees to observe, and the actor/s to perform live action in front of them, in a shared three dimensional space. The English poet Coleridge described one aspect of the agreement as a "willing suspension of disbelief" (in Brockett & Ball, 2008, p.15) on the part of the audience, who agrees to believe in the events for the duration of the performance. The agreement and the relationship may be flexible, involving "multiple perceptions on the part of both" (ibid. p.4). As in any live event, the participants may see a performance in one way, and then after thought processes, a different way. Two individuals will not necessarily see the same performance in exactly the same way. One common agreement involves the performers pretending that the audience is not there; the audience usually also agrees to pretend that the actors do not know they are there. Other combinations and agreements are possible. The events performed in the space are seen by the audience at the moment they occur. The agreement, relationship, and immediacy of the three dimensional theatre event make it a concrete experience, though this lasts only as long as the performance.

## **Theatre as a Medium for Complex, Shared, Public Thought**

Esslin (1976, p.17) notes that for sheer economy of expression, drama is not surpassed easily. It can "show ... several aspects of [an] action simultaneously and also convey several levels of action and emotion at the same time". He states that

the theatre is the place where a nation thinks in public in front of itself. And in that context all sorts of matters assume political importance, for, ultimately, there is a close link between the general beliefs of a society, its views of sexual morals, and the political climate of a nation (ibid. p.101).

Theatre holds a mirror up to society, acting as "an instrument of social innovation and in that sense it is an institution subversive of the *status quo*" (ibid. p.104). As such, theatre in general and drama in particular become an appropriate vehicle for developing futures thinking, in terms of suggesting the consequences of action taken in the present, exploring possibilities, presenting and debating alternative pathways, and examining the issue of responsibility.

Theatre has been useful in offering a venue for the "testing of human behaviour" (Esslin, 1976, p.22), using the 'what if' premise. Esslin names Ibsen, Shaw, Beckett and others who not only aired social problems of the day but "worked (them) out" (ibid.) in their plays. Ibsen's play "A Doll's House" is a common choice for study in schools, particularly with regard to its early feminist views presented, far ahead of its time. The playwright Arthur Miller supports the use of theatre as a venue of public thought: "It is necessary that the public understand again that the stage is *the* place for ideas, for philosophies, for the most intense discussion of man's fate" (1994, p.17). Not only can it be used for sharing possibilities, but it can point out and illuminate the moral dimensions of such discussions, an essential component of social mediation. Miller (1994, p.63) discusses the "tremendous growth in our consciousness of social causation" and says "It is not enough any more to know that one is at the mercy of social pressures; it is necessary to understand that a sealed fate cannot be accepted." He places responsibility for human behaviour on the shoulders of the individual, and uses theatre as a medium of critique. His statement was made over half a century ago, but it resonates clearly today as humans exert environmental pressure on their surroundings. Miller (ibid.) suggests that humans need to be more aware of the consequences of action, and to take responsibility: "The question must begin to be asked; not whether a new thing will work or pay ... but what it will do to human beings". He sees the need for writers to pose these questions in front of audiences, for their consideration of the consequences of any action under examination. Here Miller articulates the individual's influence on society, and not only that, his perception of this as a duty, a responsibility, at least in the hands of theatre participants and characters in his plays.

## **Theatre as Political Thought**

The political potential of drama is evident on close examination. Esslin (1976, p.100) underlines the strength of drama in that it gives a representation of reality, with audiences judging events for themselves because they happen in front of them. Bias is difficult to avoid, but if the playwright intends to convince the audience that his/her

opinion is the only one to be taken on board, the performance is pushed into a corner, and becomes advertising or propaganda. This can produce the opposite effect in the audience to what the playwright intended. Propaganda that is too obvious can have an alienating effect on a superficial level unless the propaganda provides a comfortable reinforcement of hegemonic assumptions about the world; in this case at deeper layers a writer's assumptions may lie unexamined. However, a well-written play will present more than one viewpoint in an issue and the audience then has food for thought and discussion. As Esslin (in Trussler, 1981, p.ix) says, "good drama will always also give the other side a fair hearing, and as such displease the pushers of the party line".

It is possible to present even a murderous dictator's side of the story, as in Anouilh's play "Antigone", in which King Creon ponders the consequences of allowing the rebellious Antigone to live, perhaps destroying his credibility as leader if he does so. She refuses to pay the price of survival and goes willingly to her death. However the social context of this play must be considered, as it was produced in Paris in 1942. The French audiences saw in the play their "own resistance to the German occupation" (foreword, Anouilh, 1960). The Germans, however, permitted the production "presumably because they found Creon's arguments for dictatorship convincing" in exactly the same play (ibid.), reinforcing *their* moral assumptions. Anouilh was lucky that the Germans did not take Antigone's words seriously; if they were displeased he would have been in deep trouble. Thus opposing strongly held opinions can make for an engaging performance if brought together on stage.

However, Esslin's statement need not be taken too literally. Polarised viewpoints are but one example of the possibilities in having characters' actions and reactions in a shared situation and space. More common are performances with multiple viewpoints; indeed it is difficult to avoid presenting these in a drama that has more than one character present, speaking and reacting to others. The playwright chooses who to bring on stage, who speaks and what actions they carry out, and who is with them; thereby exercising choice from the start, but the characters each have different personalities and voices. Perhaps a useful way to view bias in a performance is to regard it as a continuum: at one end is the single viewpoint – propaganda or advertising; at the other is a representation of all views which is, practically speaking, impossible. The writer must negotiate the relationships and actions of the characters, choosing where each stands, and where the work as a whole stands somewhere along this continuum. However, as a group effort, the performance is also in the hands of the actors who influence the bias as well, playing each character for sympathy or not. Visual and sound effects may sway an interpretation too. Thus it is difficult to avoid representing more than one viewpoint in this art form that is created through shared input. And in presenting different characters' viewpoints, some at odds with each other, the audience is offered the choice of sympathising with one or other of the characters as they react to whatever issue is affecting them, or at least understanding their problems through demonstration of the effects they have on the characters. The entertainment also lies in discovering how a character reacts to the actions of others. Here lies the value of drama in stimulating debate. For example, in "Pygmalion" by George Bernard Shaw, the issue of movement between different rigidly defined social classes is presented, and various characters have different motivations, from the self-important Professor

Higgins to the ardent Freddy and the fiercely independent Eliza Doolittle, among others. Each character has a different viewpoint in the play.

The use of drama for varied political purposes is also outlined by Esslin (1976, p.29): "In ritual as in the theatre a human community directly experiences its own identity and reaffirms it". Intentionally or not, drama functions at this deepest level.

The theatre is therefore one possible place to examine that identity. Following on from this he states, "All drama is therefore a political event: it either reasserts or undermines the code of conduct of a given society" (ibid.). If drama is political, then the theatre is a place to examine ways of thinking which shape that conduct. Thus in terms of futures thinking, plays may be part of the armoury for social change.

Taylor (1998, p.76) discusses how drama works in a qualitative dimension – outlining the creative possibilities and imagination that fictionalises possible experience and problematises it at the same time:

But surely the arts, especially the performing arts, are about challenging the conventional; they are about revealing disquiet, interrogating the subversive, and demonstrating the plight of those trying to find a voice in these troubled and unsettling times. Surely a key principle about drama and the arts is that they work on the affect, they penetrate our emotional condition, they open up experience for contemplation, and, if we are lucky, offer possibilities for human action.

Here Taylor's discussion suggests that drama has the potential to offer a service to futures studies in the pursuit of alternative meanings as well as overt political purposes. According to Taylor (ibid. p.86), "the power of the art form is that it unsettles and disturbs, it raises and confronts consciousness". Arts education is given a rationale, as it is in "that unsettling disturbance ... that we have our great justification for the arts in education" (ibid. p.87). The critical potential of drama is clearly articulated here, and is supported by Rayson (2000, p.10), as she clearly lands on the side of the artists and educators [who] " ... speak for difference ... [and] whose charter is with the people". O'Brien (2003, p.15), discusses the uses of the arts in supporting global economic and political entities, but also notes that it can be used to "provoke change. Drama action, theatrical experience, the doing and seeing – they are political activities and always have been. They have the power to critique through representation, subversion, and metaphor. Art is a weapon". Drama can demonstrate this purpose, and articulate innovative purposes. One function of drama is looking ahead to illuminate and share possible futures. Miller (1994, p.128) sees the continuity and influence of the present: "Prophetic theatre [is] an experience which widens [people's] awareness of connection – the filaments to the past and the future which lie concealed in 'life'". He encapsulates the prophetic capacity of playwrights in suggesting they explore the basic question: "How are we to live?" (ibid. p.61).

Seger (1987, p.82) notes the role played by "artists, (who) have always tended to be ahead of the times. They understand currents and trends in the beginning stages, and they find a voice and an expression for movements that might be locked in the subconscious of the rest of the population."

Esslin (1987, p.172) confirms this: "Drama tends to exercise its most powerful and lasting moral impact by reflecting the attitudes of the more advanced groups



among the population, exposing them to public outrage and discussion and thus gradually penetrating the consciousness of society". An example of past and future filaments easily observed in hindsight is Ibsen's play "A Doll's House", first published in 1879. At the time of its 1889 production in England, audiences were polarised with attitudes ranging from "widespread public hostility" to "a measure of vocal and influential support" according to McFarlane, (in Ibsen, 1981, p.ix) for Nora's departure from her respectable middle-class husband and children. Ibsen had become the "most famous man in the English literary world", according to William Archer (ibid. p.ix). He intended to foster debate: "I do but ask; my call is not to answer" (ibid. p.vi). His theatre was confrontational and controversial rather than propagandist in nature, offering a critique of society at the time, a way forward and a conservative response to this, in the one work. However, by presenting the issue in the first place in a theatre auditorium, he assisted in opening the debate on the topic of feminism, creating a space for social and individual transformation.

### Theatre as Transformative Futures Thought

Rayson (2000, p.7) defines a transformative purpose in looking ahead: "We have never had a greater need for the theatre to hurl itself into the public forum and play a role as a truth teller ... because the theatre is a place where there is real potential for galvanising social change". She outlines a goal for drama – and the field of futures studies is well placed to provide a methodology and structure for articulating that goal. However, Esslin (in Trussler, 1981, p.x) warns about the "futility of expecting short-term results from political theatre". He does emphasise the long-term effects on a "change of consciousness, the gradual *humanisation* of increasingly large numbers of people", noting the impressive results in the 60s and 70s, as the "subject matter, the language, and the social range of drama [had] been widened in [those] two decades". He discusses the success in merging form and content for this purpose:

All ... fully imagined, fully felt, skilfully presented theatre – is deeply political in that it widens perception and consciousness, enables the audience to participate more fully in the lives of their fellow human beings, to develop empathy and sympathy with them, understand their motivations, and comprehend the realities of social and personal existence (ibid.).

But he reminds us that theatre remains a minority art, although it has an impact on a larger scale through other channels, including "the side radiation of its influence by teachers and other opinion-forming elites" (ibid.). Perhaps scenario building may be seen as a related 'minority art' as Molitor (2009, p.83) echoes: "the status quo isn't so much altered by impressions and techniques as it is by the steady and relentless incremental advance of scientific and social inventions."

Drama, whether in film, television, interactive media or live performance, is valuable in terms of its potential to make rich, layered visions of the future through performance despite the fact that audiences can choose not to take it seriously, or ignore it altogether. It is still only a model or simplification of real life; yet the model attempts, and in varying degrees can succeed, in presenting a way of knowing and an essence of

complex real life that audiences can grasp, and theatre offers its particular feature; the live experience in a three dimensional space and real time. It can work as a social laboratory for 'what if's', whether present or future. The theatrical process is, as Esslin and Miller suggest, a useful testing ground for such metaphoric experiments. As Esslin (1987, p.163) says: "metaphor and symbolism inhere in the very nature and fabric of drama. The stage, or the framed window of the screen, are themselves metaphors for the world". The symbolic grounding suggested by Slaughter is explained by O'Brien (2003, p.15):

Drama is metaphor – it is representation – it is not real life. It is art. It is this aesthetic that not only allows us to understand ourselves but to glimpse and experience the transcendent – the Kantian divine. And if not that, then the immanent, what we might become. What are the narratives that take us there? They are not those that control experience but rather those that can expand it. Even if art critiques the real, surely the underlying premise is the ideal or at least the universal.

O'Brien (ibid. p.13) notes the need for using the arts as "a powerful tool ... [for]...community regeneration". Seger (1987, p.104) describes the overt working at the level of metaphor and myth: she is a script consultant who outlines the necessity of consciously working at this level in order to deepen the meaning contained within a movie script. She suggests that "many of the most successful films are based on ... universal stories" which succeed because they have an appeal that works at the layer of myth and audiences identify with the "growth, development, and transformation" that are common to "the basic journey we take in life" (ibid. p.93). Seger states that working at the level of myth enriches its function on many levels with an audience, suggesting that the most successful stories in terms of audience appreciation function at the mythic level where audiences experience archetypal human and social processes. If Seger's universality of myth applies, theatre can entertain and deliver content of depth at the same time. Rayson (2000, p.11) takes a broader approach to content, suggesting that drama can deliver at all levels, and can offer challenging ideas at those levels as well: "If anyone tells you that populism and intellectual rigour are mutually exclusive then they are wrong".

Part of drama practice in schools involves being "story-makers and story-listeners" in a process where "classrooms become sites for story-telling, story-responding and story-creating", according to Taylor (2000, p.85). The stories may be utopian, dystopian, or eutopian, offering critique by comparison or contrast. He explains that drama praxis for those involved "denotes the action, reflections and transformations of people as they engage with one another" that "should help people create a just and better world" (ibid. p.6). In an Australian high school context, students study different dramatic styles (heritage and contemporary), and in these styles they explore and present works by established playwrights that deal with social issues; as well as this, they are expected to create their own content that also explores current issues. The students are taught to develop awareness of the dramatic context (performance itself), the real context (the live performance situation), and the historical and cultural contexts in which the performance content is situated. Overtly political drama (such as Expressionism or Brecht's epic theatre) is part of this study, offering stories of repression and resistance, and the shaping of history.

This story sharing is valuable not only in schools, but in theatre practice too; audiences can enjoy performances that offer scenes set in alternative future social settings; stories that entertain, engage, question and challenge, and encourage debate, agency, and shared visions of futures to guide action in the present. The process of creating drama should "embark on many truths and generate a flexible and transformative approach" according to Taylor (1998, p.85), and this has happened in the past, as plays like "A Doll's House" (Ibsen, 1879) were part of the transformation of attitudes towards female roles in Western society. It can happen if plays create temporal transitions forward that contain timeless elements for an audience to connect with. As long as there is familiarity as well, novel content is more easily assimilated by the viewer, and human behaviour and the human condition are timeless elements the writer can work with.

Drama in study and performance is also given major importance by Berry (2000, p.96), who describes "the project of the dramatic arts" in theory and practice that "becomes one of how to institute actions and structures that reorganise the world. Berry (ibid. p.36) states that "one of the first premises with which artists must work is to agree that the theory and dramatic arts approaches they encounter are a means of interrogation" (ibid. p.34). This interrogation takes place via a simple tool: "the main strategy that cultural critics use is the question" (ibid. p.132), and the workshop for this tool is a drama teaching or performance space, in which "drama can be a safe, experimental haven for reimagining the social world" (ibid. p.65).

Thus dramatic languages with their inherent use of symbol and metaphor, can be used to present layered concrete images rich enough to grasp and discuss. These images can work at different levels at the same time, presenting concrete action informed by mythic processes. This layered working is possible within a popularist approach to writing and presentation of content that is both entertaining and challenging. The arts (including drama) have been described as having influence on defining and creating social and economic conditions in the long term, the role also changing to adapt to new conditions. As an arena of public thought, theatre can be used for the discussion of social causation and the attendant moral and political dimensions. In a theatrical production more than one viewpoint is usually represented, and if not, it becomes mere propaganda or advertising rather than exploration. All drama is thus political, affirming or questioning the status quo. In this capacity drama can be used to explore alternative futures, posing the question of how we are to live, looking ahead with a transformative purpose in content, rather than concentrating on theatrical form. Rarely do individual performances have a great effect; instead, they operate on long-term changes in consciousness, being used in this capacity by teachers and others despite being a minority art form.

### **Theatre Creating Alternatives through Play, Humour, and Engagement at a Distance**

Molitor (2009, p.86) describes a side benefit from working with scenarios: "Flippant as it may sound, there is entertainment value in pursuing scenario development". The point here is that he describes an aspect that should not be ignored if

clients and the public are to be encouraged to engage with alternative futures – that of play.

O'Toole (1992, p.21) believes that "drama, and all the arts, may usefully be viewed as playful activities. As such they are inherently collective and processual, and thus both socially and individually developmental". O'Toole's advice allows for the engagement in ideas without the pressure of direct connection to any great impact on the surroundings. Turner (1986, p.168) expands on this: "Play can be everywhere and nowhere, imitate anything, yet be identified with nothing". He adds, "there is no sanctity in play; it is irreverent and is protected in the world of power struggles by its apparent irrelevance and clown's garb" (ibid. p.170). Play may thus be regarded as an activity that is not to be taken seriously, and when linked with humour, another aspect of communication that does not ask to be gravely regarded, a distance is created among participants and observers, between the real world and a world of fanciful ideas and actions. Playfulness and humour are to be found in comedy performances in drama, and their success may be judged by smiles and laughter from the audience. In viewing a comedy, Mast (1973, p.15) refers to the audience's roles as "detached, laughing observers" with the maintaining of an "essential comic distance" which separates the audience from the need for empathy. He explains that "this detachment allows our intellect to roam over comedy's events and characters, enabling us to make connections, see parallels, become aware of ironies, perceive contradictions, consequences, causes and effects". Hence the proverb that 'many a true word is spoken in jest'. Mast (ibid. p.19) describes the paradox of light-hearted humour and serious intellectual content in the one comedy event as difficult to accept "unless I postulate (as many theorists have) that laughter is itself a physical-emotional response produced by intellectual recognition. The intellectual basis of comedy's emotional effect (laughter) is precisely what gives it its power as an intellectual tool". Fo (in Farrell, 2001, p.257) adds: "Laughter denotes a critical awareness; it signifies imagination, intelligence and a rejection of all fanaticism". Rame (ibid. p.199) uses the same "pitiless exposure of a society by means of laughter" in her writing and performance, stating that "I have always wanted to make people laugh while thinking, and to make them think while laughing".

Comedy is an intellectual tool for which Berry (2000, p.21) also sees a critical purpose. She describes uses for the comic devices of "irony and parody (that) seem initial ways to open cultural constructions for interrogation". A more extreme function, compatible with Fo's theatrical style, is described by Mast (1973, p.320): "from the beginning, comedy has been bent on destruction – of objects, egos, social assumptions, society's leaders, and the goals of society itself". Berry (2000, p.131) uses a less confrontational term that still goes further than 'opening' cultural constructions for questioning. She speaks of actually 'dismantling' modern cultural constructions, made possible by the "ludic [ridiculous] yet serious and rigorous distancing of the dramatic arts" that "provides a safe space" for the process. She further recommends that "a playful, ludic, risk-taking, creative environment is necessary, as well as practices informed by contemporary theories" (ibid. p.28). Not only may the activity of playing be used for challenging society at a distance, but in the same light mood, it may be used in the suggestion of construction, although again at a distance, in theory only.

Turner (1986, p.169) describes play as a:

hypothetical action ... one that may occur but that is not likely or intended ... Yet it may happen that a light, play-begotten pattern for living or social structuring once thought whimsical, under conditions of extreme social change may prove an adaptive ... design for living.

Turner's argument describes how ideas for the future may be offered perhaps as a humorous alternative, yet contain the seeds of a new way of life that may be taken up seriously, if and when needed. Dator's axiom (2000, para.5) makes the notion firmer, saying that "any useful idea about the future should appear to be ridiculous", describing a pathway to change that includes both strangeness and usefulness, yet employing a light humorous touch with the word 'ridiculous'. Berry (2000, p.6) suggests that these ideas and designs may be put forward because "the dramatic arts grant us the promise of exploration and playfulness, with possibilities, with a sense of seriousness, and also with a ludic temperament" which may assist in avoiding the appearance of threatening the status quo. Yet the novel ideas are still there, and as Turner (1986, p.168) says, "although 'spinning loose' as it were, the wheel of play reveals to us the possibility of changing our goals and, therefore, the restructuring of what our culture states to be reality". Berry (2000, p.41) also reiterates the importance of "the dramatic arts as cultural studies" [that have] a part to play in that reorganisation and creation of actions that move us toward a postcritical world – a ludic dance with ideas and possibilities". The postcritical world Berry refers to "would accommodate and mainstream all people" (ibid. p.64). Dame Athene Seyler, a comedy player of the English stage, notes the "health-giving properties of laughter", and describes it as "a kind of spiritual antiseptic" with the ability to "act as a mental tonic" and "preserve balance in emotional crises" (1958, p.1). Its value may thus be appreciated if applied to theatre in its conjunction with futures work, potentially mitigating in part at least, the effects of an over abundance of dystopias in popular culture. Schonmann (2006, p.6) supports this opinion, advising that "there is a need to provide the child with positive models and a feeling of optimism" in theatre for young people.

According to theatre activist Boal (1995, p.25), dealing with the future as a topic creates a "movement forward in space and time (which) is, in itself, therapeutic, since all therapy, before proposing the exercise of a choice, must consist of an inventory of possible alternatives". The therapeutic aspect of looking forward may be assisted by including light, humorous versions of these alternatives, as well as a serious examination of choices. It is possible to develop a broad spectrum of ideas and 'light fancies' to choose from or reject (thus showing the opposite as viable, potentially at least). Writers can extend alternative possibilities beyond clichéd futures cartoons with flying cars, or at the very least critique such technological Western utopian visions with humour and practicality.

Thus humour and play have considerable potential in the encouragement of 'playing with ideas' in the futures field, exploring alternatives that may seem ridiculous at the time, yet have thought-provoking possibilities for further development. Comic distance renders new ideas apparently ineffective if presented lightly and in a humorous setting, yet they still exist in the mind of the audience and the public domain, to be food for subsequent thought and debate. Lightness, humour and optimism may also

counterbalance the depressive effects of the wash of prevalent dystopias. Laughter has an intellectual basis, and shows a critical awareness that is valuable in the assessment of utopias with their tendencies towards perfection and possible fanaticism. Comic devices such as irony and parody also assist in the interrogation of culture. Looking forward may be carried out in a variety of moods, and a humorous one has much to offer young people if their engagement with their futures is to be more positive than the images offered by the mass media that wield a "distinctly negative influence", according to Slaughter (2008, p.24). A comic approach can puncture the inflated idealism of utopias as well. Totalitarian future visions of either extreme emotional flavour are well tested by humorous examination that then creates space for alternative balanced visions (eutopias and others) to be examined.

### **The Ingredients of Theatre**

The elements, or ingredients of drama/theatre are listed in the Queensland Studies Authority Senior Drama Syllabus (2007). They are given here for reference and an introduction not only to theatre, but as a basis for the teaching of drama. They demonstrate the complexity of the art form as well as its potential for breathing life into scenarios on stage.

They include *role* or character, *relationships* between characters, as well as relationships between characters and the environment, and the *situations* in which the characters exist and interact. The characters interact using *language* and *movement* (including body language, gesture, facial expression, use of personal space, and other non-verbal signs). The interaction occurs in a three dimensional dramatic *space*, with the creation of a specific *place* or setting (a forest, office, bedroom, etc). The actors constantly vary and manipulate the *mood* or the emotional tone of characters and scenes to create different effects for viewers. They control the placement and movement of the *focus* (the main point of interest that draws the attention of the audience) over the performance area. The actors build, peak and release dramatic *tension*, the level of excitement that engages the audience and takes them on a journey that can involve subtle or intense emotional highs and lows, and physical action. *Symbols* are used or created during a performance, and can carry a meaning specific to the storyline or characters, adding richness and variety to the dramatic meaning for all participants in a performance event. Thus a photograph taken as part of a performance may later be torn up by a character to symbolise the ending of a situation or relationship, or a character may smile and tenderly handle a flower given earlier, to symbolise the growth of a new relationship, and so on. Brockett and Ball (2008, p.45) describe a symbol as 'an object, event, or image that, although meaningful itself, also suggests a concept or set of relationships'.

The element of *time* is used in different ways on stage. A faster pace may be achieved by cutting parts of a story (cuts may range from seconds or minutes to years) or by simply speeding up the performance. A slow pace or pauses may be used to build tension, or slow motion used for special effects, or creating a non-realistic style. Flashbacks can give the audience a historical perspective of the events. There are other ways of playing with time, such as freeze-frames, flash-forwards, and slow or

quick motion, all of which demonstrate that this dramatic element allows for a broader representation of time than we usually consider in daily life, and all are used in live performance. Thus the element of time has possibilities for exploration in the field of futures studies, in which time is necessarily a part of the discussion. If the play is set in a different time, whether past or future, temporal distance adds to its critical capacity simply by presenting the different setting, inviting comparison and contrast. This of course applies to exotic physical settings as well.

### **Forward Theatre Applications and Potential**

I have taught Forward Theatre in high school classrooms, introducing some futures concepts such as the elements of futures studies, the extended present, trends, emerging issues, environmental scanning, tsunamis of change, and scenario categories. In class we have been using tools such as futures wheels, scenario building, incasting, timelines and backcasting, in addition to drama tools for writing scripts to perform. From these basics we have written and presented Forward Theatre performances to general public audiences of other students, parents and friends.

There are limitations in the use of this minority art form. Theatre usually operates on a small scale, with small audiences and limited runs, and it is not often recorded for later access. A further matter of scale concerns the close-up view. Zooming the audience's focus in for a close-up is not possible on stage without technical equipment; the actor can only move downstage towards the audience and upstage away from them; however, they are watching a real person in a live performance in real time. Theatre cannot compete with cinema in terms of special effects; but by the same token, a production may cost very little to mount, as an actor uses a piece of floral silk spread on the stage to represent a garden, and removed as needed to create another scene, perhaps a couple of chairs put side by side to represent a car, with skilfully mimed steering and pedals. Audiences agree to accept this make-believe, if the setting is indicated clearly and cleverly through the actors' skills, and can enjoy the flexibility and presence, choosing to believe for the duration of the performance that it is 'real'. Plays do not have the commercial support and distribution of films, but they also do not have the censorship many larger film studios can impose on a work; while in search of the money-making movie they often avoid risking offence and cater to the biggest mainstream market. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, many films begin their life as stage plays, one of the most recent being "Doubt: a Parable" by John Patrick Shanley (2005), winning a Pulitzer Prize and filmed in 2008 as "Doubt", with Meryl Streep and Philip Seymour Hoffman in the lead roles. The skill of the playwright is one of the most important factors in presenting a play and, as with any human endeavour there are many practitioners, but few at the peak of this art form.

Forward Theatre is ready to introduce to playwrights and audiences in mainstream theatre. The intention is to develop this niche so that audiences, however small, may engage more fully with futures topics and debate them. In high schools the potential is for writing a drama text book on Forward Theatre so that other drama teachers may become involved in teaching the genre to successive generations of drama students. There is also potential to write plays set in futures scenarios tailored for specific audi-

ences, such as indigenous audiences, or those with health problems, and so on. However, the intent is not to advertise or propagandise a specific alternative future, but to present distinctly separate characters' differing viewpoints on an issue for audiences to consider and discuss. There is of course always a risk that heavily biased plays could be written and performed, but this possibility does not detract from the potential value of the genre. The theatrical tool itself is neutral. Where are the writers with the talent and the interest to become involved in this art form?

Thus Forward Theatre is a hypothetical theatre, a theatre for the 21<sup>st</sup> century that supports and encourages the temporary yet concrete presentation and interpretation of alternative futures from multiple viewpoints, as well as provoking thought and conversations about these alternative futures, in a single theatrical performance.

## **FORWARD THEATRE AIMS AND DEFINITIONS**

*Ordinary people, entertaining theatre, new ways of managing our world*

### **THE AIMS OF FORWARD THEATRE ARE:**

1. To give focus and substance to futures scenarios in action
2. To promote awareness of futures concepts
3. To promote awareness of futures issues
4. To encourage audiences to participate in debates about where we should be heading
5. To promote awareness of human agency in creating a future for the Earth and its inhabitants
6. To foster optimism, confidence and energy in regarding the management of change
7. To provide an expression for the critical examination of cultural and technological artefacts, both existing and proposed, through dramatic action that explores some of their possible effects
8. To map out through action on stage, events in the construction of a conceptual landscape that creates shared meaning with focus and purpose, in contexts appropriate to the cultural backgrounds required for a given society to deal with human survival needs and other issues

### **DEFINITIONS – FORWARD THEATRE:**

1. Is a theatre of ideas, possibilities and regeneration
2. Uses Futures Studies visioning techniques such as timelines, futures wheels, back-casting and scenario building
3. Presents scenarios on stage, set in the near decades; within the life span of most audience members (20 – 30 years from now)
4. Explores the impact of social, technological and environmental change on characters, and the agency of characters who influence change
5. May be based on research and extrapolation of available data on current global trends
6. Has plots/scripts built on a single issue or multiple trends in societies, written in styles chosen to present the ideas clearly to the audience
7. Examines assumptions, attitudes and activities currently popular or dominant and



- may challenge or alter them, creating a new social context
8. May consciously present layers of change in action, from surface events and reactions to deeper cultural, psychological and spiritual layers of human experience, through character interaction.

## Correspondence

Sabina Head  
183 Glenholm St. Mitchelton Brisbane Queensland Australia 4053  
E-mail: sabina.head@uqconnect.edu.au

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